

The Blind and their Sense
Perception

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THE READER'S VIEW

THE BLIND AND THEIR SENSE-PERCEPTION

In your issue of November 3 Mr. Clarence Hawkes, in a short contribution entitled "Some Fallacies About the Blind," gave an interesting statement of some of the ridiculous notions entertained by seeing people in regard to apparently incomprehensible feats accomplished by some persons deprived of sight. My own physical disability makes this subject of particular interest to me, and I should like to add a little to what Mr. Hawkes has said.

Most individuals are so helpless in the dark or when their eyes are closed that they very naturally exaggerate the difficulty of doing without sight and often ask blind persons absurd questions. Thus I am often asked how I can enjoy the smoking of a cigar when I cannot *see* the smoke. Acts which have a perfectly simple explanation seem so wonderful that in the account of them by those who witnessed them that they are unintentionally exaggerated or misrepresented. A certain blind boy of my acquaintance was able to count the trees as he was led by them at a distance of several feet.

The simple explanation lies in the fact of what in Porter's "Human Intellect," which I studied at college, was called "acquired sense-perception." By this is meant the training of one sense to take the place of another. Every one has learned to do this more or less, but in the case of the blind necessity compels to an unusual and seemingly uncanny development of this faculty. Nearly or quite everybody is

able, even with his eyes shut, to tell by taste as well as touch that he is eating an orange or an apple, for instance.

With blind people it is the senses of touch, hearing, and smell that are especially required to perceive what ordinarily is taken cognizance of by the eyes. Mr. Hawkes has mentioned the apparent recognition of the color of a rose or other flower through the knowledge derived by the odor of the particular flower. It is precisely this sort of thing that enables a blind person to know that a certain flower is on the table or that a person is in the room when the person is keeping as still as possible, since even when the presence of the person is not betrayed by a perfume he is very apt to be betrayed by some other odor insensible to himself. Everybody has a peculiar and, to the sensitive, a *distinguishing* or *characteristic* odor. It was this fact that enabled Laura Bridgman, who could neither see nor hear, to assist in assorting the laundry of the other inmates of the school. In my professional work it is this sense of smell that, detecting a particular odor about a patient, has enabled me to tell his occupation, as, for instance, that of a painter or cigarmaker. It is this acquired sense-perception that has often informed me that I was passing a grocery or dry-goods or other store. There is nothing peculiar or wonderful in this when one understands the reason.

Every one knows that most blind persons possess unusually keen and trained hearing, and

it is this keenness or alertness of observation through the ears that enables one without sight to detect what is going on about him or to interpret just what another person in the room is doing. Of course some blind persons possess a keener power of observation or of interpretation through their remaining senses than have some others. It is, after all, only a matter of training.

But I desire especially to speak of the sense of touch possessed by the blind. Most persons appear to think that touch, or rather the sense of appreciating objects by touch, lies only or mainly in the hand. There is a far finer sense of touch than that, delicate as is the hand or finger. The skin or nerves of the face residing in the skin possess in the *trained* a remarkable sensitiveness, and it was that sort of keenness of sensation of the face that enabled the boy already mentioned to count the trees as he passed, or which permits a blind person to know when he has approached a wall, although undoubtedly sound has more or less to do with it in some instances. Then the feet of the blind acquire a peculiar sensitiveness which enables the individual to recognize locality through peculiarities of the surface on which he is treading. Unevenness in the floor or differences in the thickness or feel of rugs or carpets, for instance, assist the blind in recognizing just where he is in a room. Finally, the observing person without sight may, and often does, possess or acquire an unusual sense of distance, so that he is able to judge very accurately just where he is.

These and many more instances of acquired sense-perception might be given, but I fear I have trespassed already on your valuable space and on the patience of the reader. I desire in concluding to say only that there is more truth than poetry in the remark once made by a blind man who had "made good" in his field of endeavor, "The blind can do anything but see."

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Babcock, Robert Hall.

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